

**Engaging the Community through Honors: A Practical Guide**

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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Abstract:

There is a pervasive problem among college students, universities, and honors colleges in the modern day. With a focus on their academic pursuits, students and faculty remain in their “campus” mindsets and lose sight of the community and the people living in it. Universities may throw around words such as community engagement or service learning, but very few actually execute these ideas to make a genuine difference in the community. Even among honors colleges, community engagement is more often visualized as one-off volunteering requirements for students. While this type of volunteerism is beneficial, there are problems with short term volunteering. When students only involve themselves in community projects for short, disjointed periods of time, there is no lasting impact, no relationship built, and no long-term benefits to all involved. Our research examines what community engagement is, why it should be an integral component to any honors program, and the best practices for creating a sustainable community engagement program in any university or honors college community. With so much focus on service learning in honors communities, this research strives to push further and add a new perspective to the conversation, a perspective where the focus is almost entirely outside of the classroom. In our research, we use our campus, Ball State University, and its position in the Muncie, Indiana community to conceptualize how honors colleges and their students can lead the way to blazing a new path in community engagement. In the appendix, we have shared a few materials to help jumpstart the creation of long-term community engagement programs, including the “Ten Ways to Fail” handout we created in the process of this research.

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### Process Analysis Statement:

In October 2016, I traveled to Seattle to attend and present at the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference with other members of my student organization. Along with several colleagues, we spent a few days in the city, attending interesting sessions and learning more about ourselves. One of these sessions was led by three young women. They presented a program they had created in their community - a sustainable partnership with the community that worked to address a community need. My colleague and I were both interested in their program. We both wondered why our honors college had never developed programs like this. Why was it that the only volunteering available to us was in the form of one-off, short term work? As officers for the governing organization of the honors college, Student Honors Council, we brought this idea home with us, in the hopes of developing it into something tangible for our organization and community.

As we began to work with the idea, our scope continuously grew wider. We didn't know what we wanted to create, or if we would even be able to create it! We met with faculty, administration, and other students, attempting to narrow our idea into something we could work with. Yet, it seemed to grow and grow. The more ideas we heard, the less we were sure of, and the more questions we had. What would a program like this even look like? How can we create something the community actually wants, while also using the unique aspects of honors? After a few months of meetings, polls, and forums, we realized how big of a project we had taken on. It made sense for us to develop these questions and ideas we had been working with for so long into something tangible - our thesis.

Even once we knew this was going to be our thesis, we still didn't know what our end product would be. In the early optimistic weeks, we imagined creating an entire program from



scratch. As time went on, and we realized what it would mean to undertake such a project, we eventually decided our time and efforts would be best spent by researching the best practices of community engagement and creating a guide or plan for future students to follow. This is how I hope this thesis will be used. So, in August 2017, after months of trying to tackle this project, nearly a full year later, we began our research. Very quickly, we realized that co-writing a thesis had been an excellent choice. As two seniors nearing the end of our college years, most weeks there were projects that we easily could have put before our thesis. Due to our accountability to one another, however, we were able to stay focused and dedicate hours every single week to our research.

We began our research at the broadest level - asking big questions at first. We had to ground ourselves in the research of our topic before we could draw any conclusions or begin deeply researching specific topics. We first asked questions such as, what is honors? What is community engagement? What does it mean to be sustainable? We also looked into the experiences of other universities with creating similar programs, and found as many failures as successes. Each new article would link or cite back to something else, and eventually we developed a literature review that represented the current research on the subject. At one point, as I was reading one of the books, it referenced another book, which we had read, and an author whose work we had already discovered. For the first time, we felt that we had accomplished a successful literature review. Everything we read connected and cited one another, helping to build both the breadth and depth of our research.

The research, annotated bibliography, and subsequent outline were all developed within the first two months. By having two people working on the project, we were able to research on a much deeper level than if it had been just one of us working alone. By working as partners, we

were also able to bring in the strengths and interests of two different people. Although we are friends and colleagues, we have different majors, and different abilities and ways of thinking. As a social studies education major, I was interested in the pedagogy behind community engagement. Is service-learning the best way to develop these kinds of programs, or are there other, better ways? I believe my work with this thesis will be helpful in my career as an educator - students at all levels can benefit from sustained involvement in the community. Although I'm not from Muncie, and I will be leaving it soon, I have long felt an attachment and interest in the community. Witnessing the derision that so many other students felt about Muncie locals helped me develop an even stronger belief that a thesis like this is necessary. No one should spend four years in a city without learning anything about it, and community engagement programs like the ones advocated for in this thesis can help to change that common practice.

Of course, feeling optimistic by the ease and speed of our early work, we set a deadline for a rough draft that, looking back, was perhaps laughable. We should have known it was unrealistic when our thesis advisor asked us what we would be doing for the last month if we turned it in so early. Yet, we persevered. After much trial and error, we created a handout and presentation for NCHC, and traveled to Atlanta to present it. Our time at the conference, listening to others and presenting our own work, reaffirmed our belief that what we were working on was an important contribution to the larger discussion. Upon returning from Atlanta, it felt as though time sped up. Suddenly thesis meetings were no longer easy work sessions but intense times when we hammered out as much as we could. Our other classes and commitments pulled us away from our dedicated thesis time, making it harder to stick with our schedule. Despite working all semester on this project, our original self-created draft deadline was nearly a month earlier than our actual first draft was turned in.

Throughout the process, I was glad to have a partner. Feeling accountable to someone other than myself pushed me to show up every week ready to work, no matter what else was going on in my life. Of course, there were some days where distractions got the best of us, but for the most part, having a partner pushed me to be better. Without a partner, it is very likely that my thesis would have been pushed off until the last month of the semester, making an already difficult task insurmountable. I see this thesis as my lasting contribution to the Honors College at Ball State and the Student Honors Council specifically. Both organizations have given so much to me in my four years at Ball State, and I hope this guide can give something to them in return. I hope that a student, or a group of students, will be able to pick up this thesis, read the guide, and be able to skip the struggles we faced. Instead of future students needing to deal with huge abstract ideas like we did, this thesis makes the creation of sustainable community engagement programs more accessible by providing a succinct guide that gathers all of the best research in one place and allows readers to avoid many issues that have brought down programs in the past. This thesis, although not directly related to either of our majors, has been our passion for much longer than a semester and will hopefully be useful in our lives and the lives of future students at Ball State and colleges throughout the nation.



### Community Engagement and Experiential Learning

In current conversations about honors programs and what their responsibility is in the community, ideas of service learning often arise. The origins of service learning are found in John Dewey's work on experiential learning. Dewey emphasized the importance of experiential learning in educational pedagogy in his book *Experience and Education*. His philosophy was that "all principles by themselves are abstract. They become concrete only in the consequences which result from their application," (Dewey 8). The application of principles taught in the classroom is the defining theme of Dewey's book. Translated to the modern day, this theory applies to the movement, particularly in higher-education, towards service learning. Dewey is not the only philosopher of education who was a supporter of service learning; Vygotsky too "believed learning from experience or 'learning by doing' is the process whereby human development occurs," (Powell 100). The concept of service learning has since taken shape through academic standards but the concepts can also apply to community engagement that takes place outside of the classroom.

Service learning can take a variety of forms, but can be generally defined as student participation in departmentally organized coursework in which a community partner is identified prior to or during the project, where students complete a project which simultaneously serves the community and furthers their own studies. We argue that while service learning can be a good starting point for community engagement, it is not the ideal way to nurture students toward having a sincere interest in the community. Service learning is not ideal for a number of reasons. The first issue with service learning is that it forces the community to operate on "university time." Rarely do community needs fit into the format of an academic year, or semester. In our



presentation at the NCHC conference in Atlanta, this was one of the “ten ways to fail” that we discussed (Appendix A). This concept is discussed in detail further in the paper.

There are other issues with service learning – such as the question of motivation. In the classroom, service learning resulting in a grade may lead to forced, artificial participation in the community. One community organizer expressed the belief that loyal volunteers should be placed above service learners, because they are there due to an “intrinsic motivation to help and not from a requirement for course credit” (Stoecker 36). It could be argued that this type of involvement has its benefits and is better than no involvement, but artificial involvement from university students time and time again can leave the community feeling used, and might end up doing more harm than good. The community may feel the work done was only beneficial to the student or the university’s image. Community engagement, in the form detailed in this paper, is focused on building a reciprocal relationship between universities and the communities they exist in, rather than fulfilling a course requirement. This type of relationship building would positively contribute to an altered narrative of community and university integration, as well as building a culture of inclusion and partnership rather than division and animosity.

The experiences gained through service and engagement in the community offer a myriad of benefits to students, faculty, universities, and of course the community itself. These benefits only exist, however, if the engagement is done through a system of mutuality and reciprocity based on open communication. In an increasingly divided and individualistic world, it is important to focus on activities that bring people together through meaningful relationships. An emphasis on the individual can lead to the development of “a worldview in which there is no basis for enduring commitment beyond the self” (Colby xxii). Successful community engagement programs can combat this cultural tendency. Community partners, defined as

“members of the community in businesses, government agencies, and social service organizations that agree to work with students individually or collectively in order to meet community needs,” (Cress, *Learning* 18) can join with students to create meaningful partnerships, encouraging all parties to commit to projects and ideas beyond either entities’ usual abilities.

In some communities, like Muncie, there is a noticeable divide between the university and the city in which it exists. When a university is not well-integrated into the community this divide can lead to resentment and even animosity between students and community members who only interact in a few overlapping spaces, such as the local Walmart or the perimeters of campus. Increased communication and cooperative efforts can result in the recognition of similar goals and projects, and increased efforts to integrate those interests into larger projects. Work with the community can also change student perspectives of the community. Rather than believing they are “saving” or “helping” the community, they see the community, and those within it, as equals. Cress quotes Rachel Naomi Remen in the second edition of her book, *Learning Through Serving*, “when you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole,” (45). By engaging with the community as equal partners, students will begin to see community members as whole beings, rather than people who need to be fixed or saved. In the next section, the benefits to all stakeholders will be discussed in further detail.

### Benefits to Stakeholders

During the initiation phase of any community engagement program, students, honors colleges, and community partners may wonder “what’s in it for me?” This critical question is

essential to defining the project. Each partner must understand what they are getting out of the project in order for it to be worth their time. According to one community organizer, “what makes it successful is that we each come out of it feeling like we’ve gotten something,” (Stoecker 155). Although the benefits to all stakeholders should be carefully considered, it is important to prioritize the community and its needs.

Neglecting to prioritize the community during any stage of the relationship will result in an unsuccessful project. In the book *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu is critical of engagement efforts which focus only on student needs and student benefits. She interviewed nonprofit workers and community members in the United States and United Kingdom about their experiences working with university students. She gives an example from a student in 2003 who wrote an email to a Boston street newspaper stating all of her requirements for the project and asking for information from the organization. The executive director laughed and said, “No thanks. Help like that is no help at all.” Mathieu expands on why this is a problem:

More than just a stray example, this story exemplifies the problems that can occur when teachers themselves are not connected to the community and *assign* organizations to students or ask students to *seek out* sites themselves... [the] email indicated that she *must* produce media proposals/ campaigns to educate *people* about this local nonprofit and homelessness. Whether or not such documents would be useful to this organization seems not to have been considered at all. (Mathieu 100-101).

There are significant and inevitable benefits to the students which evolve from helping the community, but implementing a “community first” attitude early in the project increases community trust and cooperation and encourages the students and honors college or university to focus the project on improving the community.



A successful community engagement program will be beneficial to the community in a number of ways. The community partner can gain publicity from its partnership with the university which has greater visibility. They also gain the extra hands and hours to do work in their organization which might otherwise be neglected due to their being overworked and stretched thin. Carole Beere describes a few of these benefits in her book, *Becoming an Engaged Campus*. Beere discusses what the university is able to provide the community, a list which includes obvious advantages, such as additional manpower and money, as well as less discernible benefits for the community:

[benefits] include access to faculty expertise that can be an unbiased trusted voice; access to an expanded resource base including grant opportunities and the university's physical, financial, and human resources; added credibility for jointly produced work (for example, grants, evaluation reports, and project proposals); the satisfaction of working with students; new ideas and new learning as a result of work with faculty, students, and other members of the community; access to an organization that has the capacity to convene, to bring together groups that are in conflict; and often, an opportunity to influence the university's direction and programs. (Beere 30)

Beere's perspective reflects the traditional approach to the university-community relationship and has a tendency to privilege the position of the university over the community, taking a top-down approach. This is particularly evident in assumptions such as the unbiasedness of faculty and the satisfaction of working with students. The discussion of "credibility" best exemplifies how the dynamic is complicated by perceptions of the university versus the community and how to engage in a dialogue between the two. Considering the benefits to stakeholders from a bottom-



up approach changes the narrative and gives the community more agency, which is essential to a positive relationship.

With a shift in the narrative used to discuss the benefits from the university, we can better evaluate the benefits to the student, an important piece to getting busy students out into and involved with the community. At most universities, students have their pick of hundreds of organizations, many of which include volunteer work. Understanding, and publicizing, what the involved students will gain from the project is essential because effective long-term community engagement programs depend on the steady involvement of students who are truly passionate about the community and working within it. Without students, the types of programs advocated in this paper would never leave the ground. Even the most civic-minded, selfless student will want to know how their involvement will benefit them.

Students who interact and involve themselves with community engagement initiatives will gain more than another “volunteer” experience to include on a résumé, although this is an added value. They will build an extensive network of contacts in their community, real-world experience in their field, and as Beere suggests, “an appreciation of ethical issues that affect the world of practice; a better sense of self, increased self-confidence, and a clearer understanding of how to make a difference in one’s community” (Beere 29). Students will learn to be active citizens in a democracy, where their actions have consequences not just for themselves, but also the world around them. Participating in a community engagement program also gives students a sense and awareness of place in their transient university experience, connecting them to the wider community, and making their education feel more relevant to their daily lives.

The community and students are not the only stakeholders who receive benefits from long-term engagement programs. The university and honors college often visibly benefit from

community engagement as well. The public relations opportunities which emerge from community partnerships are important to advancing the university's funding and student recruitment through media attention. This attention can build community support for the university, generate donations, and even attract students (Beere 190). When a university and community are heavily connected, these benefits can trickle down and help the community as well. A university or honors college that talks about community engagement in their mission statements must actually support the creation of those programs if they wish to demonstrate their commitment to the community, the students, and their mission. The university also benefits from the fulfillment of its mission. When considering potential benefits to the honors college and university, it is vital to remember that the "why" behind the betterment of the community. It's common to see community engagement spun by university marketing and the media to advance the public image of the university. And while this is an auxiliary benefit, it should not be the main drive behind the engagement program. Rather, the main "why" should be creating and supporting programs that make a long-term difference in the community. These serve to improve the community-university relationship on all levels, and distinguish the university as a vital part of the community. Urban universities especially gain visible benefits by their work in the community, as it helps to improve the neighborhood and quality of life directly surrounding the university (Beere 27).

The faculty involved in the community engagement initiative can benefit as well by integrating the program in their research and in their teaching. Impactful, real-world examples can be used in the classroom to expand students' worldview and encourage them to go beyond their usual circle. Furthermore, the expertise of the faculty and university students can certainly a benefit to the community project. Faculty are not the only valuable holders of knowledge,

however, and one should remember that “the wisdom that is found in groups of ordinary people... often exceeds that of experts,” (Beere 19). As with all other parts of this partnership, the transfer of knowledge is reciprocal, and will be discussed in detail later in this paper. The importance of reciprocity is one of the foundational components of the relationship between university and community, which is why a discussion of mutual benefits to all stakeholders is essential to creating meaningful and successful programs.

Our research focuses specifically on how the nature of honors colleges and honors programs uniquely positions them to work and make a difference in communities through the values of “honors.” These values will be discussed further in the following section.

### Why Honors?

What is honors, and what makes it unique? These questions are foundational to honors colleges and honors programs nationally and internationally. They have been discussed at length by honors professors, administrators, and students on campuses and at conferences such as the National Collegiate Honors Council. For our research, we have listened to and participated in these discussions to better understand how honors can contribute to communities, if it should, and why it should. Taking this question a step further led us to ask, “What is it about an honors program that makes it the best fit for a community engagement program?” No two honors programs are the same, but they do share some concrete values, related to their academic qualities, which make them exemplary candidates for creating long-term community engagement programs. These qualities are; the leadership and agency of honors students on campus, the interdisciplinary nature of honors, the emphasis of process and relationships over product, and the expansions of students’ views of the world.



One of the most important features of honors programs is the emphasis on student leadership, innovation, and agency. In our own experience and from hearing from other universities at regional and national conferences, students in honors are often heavily engaged on their campuses through their coursework and student organizations, tending to have one or more leadership positions in campus organizations. Honors-based student-led community engagement initiatives push the demonstrated leadership of honors students on campuses outwards to the community. Honors students are often already highly motivated to go the extra mile, and “can serve as role models for their peers and encourage other students to push themselves beyond the formal requirements of their coursework,” (Alger 63). As we have previously mentioned, community engagement programs are more effective when they live outside of academic requirements and instead rely on the students’ own inclination to be involved. Successful implementation of community engagement initiatives external to academic requirements could create a purposeful and meaningful culture of involvement which extends the discussion and values of honors into the community while simultaneously making civic-mindedness an important feature of the culture of honors. Student ownership keeps the university from dominating the conversation and allows students to have the agency and control to define the program for themselves.

Every discipline within a university has their own way of looking at the world around them. Historians and scientists can examine the same problem through different lenses unique to their discipline, using different methods to arrive at results. In some ways, particularly in the university setting, these ways of thinking stay isolated within the department, rarely interacting with one another. One of the essential features of an honors program is their interdisciplinary nature, which comes from bringing students together from all disciplines and encouraging them



to work with one another. These interdisciplinary ways of thinking allow creative and out-of-the-box solutions to problems. A single scientist, or even a group of scientists, might not be able to see the solution to a problem until they work with, for example, a sociologist who brings a different perspective to the problem. Indeed, “the most groundbreaking work in research is done at the fringes of disciplines, where they meet and mingle with one another,” (Cress, *Learning Through Serving* 116). Honors colleges, out of any part of the university, are better equipped to address difficult issues in the community with creativity due to their interdisciplinary nature. It’s important to keep in mind that a community, and community partners, are similarly diverse in strengths and knowledge, even if they are not organized by clear distinctions between disciplines, which is largely unique to academia.

The next notable feature of an honors college in regards to community engagement is the emphasis on process over product. When student grades are tied to the success or failure of a community engagement project, it becomes easy to emphasize the importance of the end-result or product, and the need to achieve an ‘A.’ This mindset puts the emphasis on the students’ success, which doesn’t always correspond with the success of the program or its implementation in the community. The *Unsustainable* anthology offers an analysis by Lorelei Blackburn and Ellen Cushman of their classroom experience with a service learning project. The project took place in a local library and focused on working with adults to improve their writing. These adults’ writing skills were considered the product, so the professor focused on finding library patrons to participate. The students who were participating in the project quickly became overwhelmed with the class and struggled to recognize the value and importance of their work. The professor believed that she was at fault for having an undefined product and combining it with the course work. She believes that the program would have been better if she had focused

on the relationships established during the project, rather than a product. The feedback from the community patrons was highly favorable despite the students' discontent, leading her to believe that she did not do a good job of describing and balancing learning outcomes, student needs, the product, and the community (Blackburn 161-177).

The community engagement programs discussed in this research are not part of a class, and would not be for a grade, making it necessary to conceptualize ideas of success or failure outside of the realm of a grading scale. Positive, mutually beneficial relationships are the main "product" that community engagement programs should seek to create. Although resources are exchanged and a positive relationship grows from a project, students still might struggle to recognize what their "success" was without there being a tangible product of their work. This idea of outcomes is discussed in more detail later on, but at this point it is important to realize that a project can be successful without something tangible coming out of it. Recognizing that work isn't always product-driven is important to abstract projects, such as those found in honors, and can be useful when applied to community engagement initiatives which are susceptible to uncontrollable structural changes which might affect their longevity and success.

Community engagement programs can produce a multitude of outcomes, both positive and negative, so it is essential to remember that these programs do real work with real people. There are consequences when a community program or partnership fails. Randy Stoecker writes in his book that he has "heard other academics talk about the community as a 'laboratory' where students try things. None of them reflect on the consequences for the community of failed projects," (9). Failure itself is an ambiguous idea in these situations. A project is not a failure for ending after one year if it managed to serve its original purpose and has benefited the community. Those in charge of such projects should keep in mind that "sustainability in and of

itself should be considered neither a goal nor a universal good... sustainability is only desirable to the extent that it promotes this end,” (Feigenbaum 33). Once the goals of a project have been met, it may naturally dissolve, or be re-imagined. The way to assess whether a program has met its goals is through evaluation, which is discussed in detail later in this paper. As demonstrated in honors courses which are based in and driven by discussion, part of honors is understanding when the goals of a discussion have been met and when the point has been made. The way of getting to an answer, or solution, is often more important than the answer itself, just as the relationships built along the way are more important than the product in a community engagement program.

The next quality of an honors college education is how honors pushes students to expand their worldviews and change their perceptions. This is not to say that honors courses set out to make students think a certain way, but rather to teach them how to think. Many honors programs include classes emphasizing non-western perspectives in the curriculum. By reading and engaging in discussions about non-western text, students are encouraged to explore a sampling of different worldviews and schools of thought with colleagues outside of their discipline. This combination encourages students to think in new ways and develop a wider understanding of the world. In the syllabus for an honors course at Ball State focused on “ways of being and knowing” outside of the west, the instructor writes, “you can expect to find ideas here that may challenge your notions of who and what you are, so be prepared to be open-minded about what you encounter,” (Berg 1). Through this and other classes offered in honors curriculums, students often discover that their views do not always align with their classmates and that even within the realm of western thought, there are widely different ways of thinking.



When students engage with new and diverse communities, they are exposed to ideas and people they would not otherwise interact with during their college careers. An honors college curriculum should teach students “to use their vaunted critical-thinking skills to understand the world and its complexities,” rather than just teaching them how to think critically about imagined or theoretical situations (Klos 54). Applying an honors education to community engagement allows students to gain real world experience and apply their education in the community. This application benefits both students and the community, for “when academic theory meets actual community issues, a different level of understanding and actions frequently results,” (Cress, *Learning* 199). In addition to the previously mentioned benefits for students, this educational experience allows students to dive deeper and “can set the stage for a life of continuous learning and engagement beyond college” (Clauss 98). By engaging with their surrounding community students recognize how differently their neighbors live. They might learn more about the life of a homeless woman or what a child dependent on free and reduced lunches. Expanding one's worldview can occur in one's own community.

#### Why Ball State?

Our school, Ball State University, is in Muncie, Indiana, an average sized, post industrial, midwestern town of 69,000 people. Ball State has around 22,000 students enrolled. The university and the community, however, are physically divided by the White River, in addition to economic and social divisions. There are a number of efforts made by the university and community to bridge the gap. One example is the academic-focused Immersive Learning model which brings together students and community partners to tackle a project that will benefit the community partner over the course of a semester. The Muncie community also makes consistent



efforts to invite students to off-campus events, with mixed results. However, despite projects like these, the divide is still noticeable, which is why we believe the Honors College is uniquely poised to lead the way in community engagement at Ball State.

In the process of this research, Ball State came under the leadership of a new President, Geoffrey Mearns. Within his first few months at Ball State, President Mearns held three “Better Together” community forums where he and other leaders on campus and in the community discussed how the university can help with community issues. It will take time to see if these early efforts will turn into a positive change for the Muncie community. The gesture of engagement isn’t enough without action and tangible outcomes, as some of the community members who attended the forums made sure to point out. Tired of being burned by university promises, the community members who spoke wanted to make it clear that “seeing is believing.” At the second forum focused on arts and culture in Muncie, many university representatives complained that community members don’t attend the events put on by the university. This mindset of expecting the community to come to campus not only ignores the arts and cultural events off-campus, but also fails to ask whether the events being provided at the university are what the community wants.

Finding support from the university is important to community engagement initiatives. Without backing and structural support of programs, it is easy for community engagement programs to be lost or forgotten once a student moves on from the university. This turnover is all too common, and leaves the community partners without university or student support and without a program which might have been beneficial to them. Fortunately for our research and for future community engagement endeavors in Muncie, Ball State University and leadership in the honors college support and encourage the types of programs we emphasize in this research.

While it is essential that these programs are student-led and student-driven, they can only be effective and beneficial “when their views are welcome, respected, and acted upon” by the university and administration (Thomas 84). Students acting without university support will not be able to achieve the same results as those who are fully supported within the university structure.

Ball State University declares a commitment to community engagement, which we believe has been fulfilled to a certain degree, but is still lacking. On the Ball State website, the statement reads, “Ball State is committed to establishing and nurturing collaboration among faculty, students, and community partners to address society’s most pressing needs in a reciprocal and mutually beneficial way,” (Ball State). This vision of community engagement offers a promising future for the types of programs we encourage in Muncie, but is no guarantee of institutional support. After all, “developing a mission statement with a clear commitment to public engagement is important but not sufficient to advance the work. It is equally important that the university *lives* its mission,” (Beere 53). Those working to create community engagement programs may have to work to develop support at the institutional level before ever delving into the community. At the Ball State Honors College, the leadership and faculty have demonstrated a commitment and interest in community engagement, making this research, and any future development of programs, easier for all involved.

### Best Practices

#### Working from the Bottom Up with Tactics

Communities that have worked with universities in the past are often wary of the university trying to help them without first asking what their problems are or what they need to

solve those problems. This is a common problem, as discussed by Paula Mathieu in her example, “No One Burned, But No One Helped Much Either.” In this scenario, nothing bad happened, but the intentions were misplaced. A group of students created proposals for a nonprofit, where they practiced good communication and met several times with the community partner. However, the class objective was to teach the students to write proposals, not necessarily to create proposals useful to the nonprofit. The director of the nonprofit shared that “it was hard to imagine what kind of projects students could do that would also be directly relevant to us in one term. We’ve met this faculty member, but she didn’t know our organization all that well. None of these student projects will be specific enough to really meet any of our needs,” (Mathieu 103). This type of experience is not explicitly negative, but instead was almost completely useless. This story is an excellent example demonstrating why these programs must work from the bottom up if they seek to make any meaningful impact on the community.

The philosopher Michel de Certeau theorizes a difference between what he calls strategies and tactics. Strategies refers to the institution or the entity which holds power and control. Tactics operate within the strategy-- the pre existing infrastructure. They are observant and flexible, as they rely on shifting and changing to operate within the institution and the environment provided. Tactics are in the business of “making-do” with what is available. Paula Mathieu uses this theory of power dynamics to conceptualize how universities and communities interact in the same space. Most universities, when engaging with the community, use strategic models, “proceeding as if the university were the controlling institution determining movements and interactions” (Mathieu xiv). This orientation places the university above the community, where ideas and programs come from the top and are organized within the university framework. The strategic model has the potential to lead to new insights and remove uncertainty by creating



stable programs, which can be appealing. Tactical models, however, allow engagement programs to work within the community and its needs, while opening the door to change and uncertainty. A tactical model may sound more challenging, but is overall a better practice for community engagement, allowing for equal partnerships and flexibility.

The language used to describe work in the community defines the relationship and the narrative of community and university partnerships. “Problem solving ‘for’ communities is an outdated and elitist view,” (Thomas 90). This problematic dynamic should be avoided in the development of a community engagement program. Rather than programming “for” the community or “to” the community, our research indicates that changing the narrative to engaging “with” the community will lead to more positive outcomes for both the university and for the community partners. In the same vein of changing the language, students should not visualize their work as “saving” the community, but rather see themselves as genuine partners who forge an authentic connection with the community and those who live within it.

The term “community” can itself be problematic, because it implies a cohesive, homogenous group with similar motivations and goals for their neighborhood or town. The word implies a sense of unity, without variation or diversity. Christine Cress cites an example in *Community Partner Guide to Campus Collaborations* in which college students went door to door to assist a local PTA in delivering information about nutrition. They grew frustrated when the community members were unengaged. They learned shortly after that there were issues between the PTA and the community as well as a growing non-English speaking immigrant population. When the students learned the details of the neighborhood and learned more about diversity, they were better able to serve the community (Cress 38-39). Within a community there are broad divisions, such as social class or religion, as well as narrower, less obvious distinctions

that break down into communities within the larger one. If one is not careful, “community can soon become an empty and sentimental word,” (Harris 134-135). The positive connotations of the word neglect the complications and challenges found in a community.

Applying tactics and strategies allows us to conceptualize the model differently, always focusing on the community. A strategic model of community engagement sees the geographic area as one unified community that it can serve in one way, without adjustment. A tactical model understands that within the city, there are hundreds of divisions and smaller community groups and that one program will not serve every community. This is also important to remember when attempting to “export” the ideas of one community engagement program into a new university. A project, no matter how successful, cannot be taken from one location and dropped on the next without careful consideration of the actual strengths and needs of the community. A successful community engagement program must be specific to the community that it serves, and therefore must be adjusted if applied to a new community, implying tactical models for adaptability and flexibility.

Listening to the community, and what community members have to say, is a non-negotiable step in creating a successful program. “Community members know the community, its history, its resources, and its problems,” more so than any student who has a more temporary presence in the community (Beere 193). The knowledge and insights provided by the community will undoubtedly assist the creation of a program that meets its goals and actually serves the community. Listening and respecting the community’s contributions requires students to “recognize community partners as legitimate sources of valuable knowledge,” (Donnelly 128), rather than believing that the university and its faculty and students have superior knowledge.

This is something many universities struggle with, and is exemplified in the book *Becoming An Engaged Campus*, where the author writes that “collaborating with the community requires patience and a set of skills that may be totally alien... for example... respecting the views and ideas of those who are not as educated or knowledgeable,” (Beere 98). The language of the book aligns with the narrative that the community partner holds less knowledge than the university. These traditional views are not ideal for creating an equal partnership with the community.

Examples in which community partners feel as though they are being treated as inferiors are plentiful. Crispin Butteriss explores the concept of “condescending community engagement,” providing a dramatic example in which a consultant to a community organization held a lecture rather than holding an open forum with the community. When responding to the community members, once they were given the opportunity to speak, she spoke increasingly slowly until an individual shouted, “stop patronizing us!” (Butteriss). Students must be receptive to ideas and input from the community, respecting their knowledge and experience on community-specific issues, and understanding they can learn just as much, or possibly more, from the community as the community can learn from them.

Working with strategic models, while not inherently bad, can negatively impact the relationship between the university and the community, potentially for years to come. One example of how the university expects the community to adjust to their needs is the concept of implementing “university time,” which was briefly mentioned earlier. The university calendar year is divided into semesters or trimesters, and generally operates from August to May. Real life does not work on this timeline. Randy Stoecker gives a voice to these concerns in *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*. He interviewed a program director who expressed the ideal timeframe for his organization, a common theme throughout our research.



“Projects are a one-time deal; next semester the focus shifts, our priorities change. It would be nice to have some more ongoing relationships we can massage and nurture over time. I think we would get stronger projects on both sides that way,” (Stoecker 112). University time can also influence the time of day for meetings and other events, focusing on what is best for students rather than the community. The university’s timetables are strategic and more convenient for their purposes, but operating in that model is not likely to produce quality relationships or projects.

### Why Does Sustainability Matter?

In the 2015-2016 school year, Ball State University students self-reported 8,744 service experiences (Division 1). Although this is an ambiguous statistic, and the report does not provide further detail, we know from personal experiences and observations how many of those “experiences” were one-time, unconnected events that had little long-term impact for the community or students. These types of experiences, generally referred to as “volunteering,” “one-off volunteering,” or “short-term service learning” have a value, but are not the best model for community engagement at the university level. When John Dewey wrote about experiential learning, he made it clear that one-time events would not be beneficial in a long-term or significant way to any involved, writing that “experiences may be so disconnected from one another that while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another” (Dewey, 14). In the research for this thesis, the challenges of short term service arose frequently.

Those familiar with short-term service will note the benefits to the community partner and to the student. When someone only comes to volunteer for a few hours, the student gets what

they need, which is usually hours that they can report for an academic or organization requirement. The community partner is able to have the students accomplish minor, superficial tasks that would take time away from the already busy full time staff. These experiences have their place, but the student has more to offer and the community partner has greater needs.

Author Maren Orchard has personal experience with this type of volunteering. She volunteered at the Muncie children's museum every Saturday for a semester. The tasks assigned to her were trivial, such as picking up toys or telling visitors not to run. The experience did not cultivate her skills in museum work and she knew that the organization had greater needs than she was meeting. It was frustrating for her that the museum was going through the motions to help her get easy volunteer hours, rather than utilizing her time for more in-depth tasks. For many community organizations, it is easier to just give quick, inconsequential tasks to students who can only come for a few hours each time. One community organizer wrote that "we tend not to have projects sitting around for them, and tend not to have the time or energy to create projects that are going to be meaningful for them.... It's just too hard" (Stoecker 31-32). This method does not maximize the time of the student or the organization. The student feels their time has been wasted, and the community partner sees no substantial difference in their institution.

The concept of sustainability is critical to developing long-term community engagement initiatives, but it's a difficult benchmark to achieve. Universities are transient by nature. The student body turns over annually, and faculty and administrators come and go, or shift positions within the university. Communities face changes daily as well. Nonprofits in particular are susceptible to high turnover rates, without the infrastructure to handle that issue. While these factors make sustainability difficult, it is possible and worthwhile. Sustainable projects are proven to better connect students to the community and to create more long-lasting change.

College students behave like visitors to the towns where they go to college, but when students participate in long-term community engagement programs, they build connections and relationships within the community. This leads to students having a sense of place, and some may even remain in the community after graduation. Author Alyssa Larsen experienced this connection to the community after volunteering several semesters at a local arts center. Despite being an out-of-state student, she found a connection with the Muncie community due to a long-term involvement. Short term service fails to develop these types of relationships, and students remains guests in the town rather than members of it, and never immerse themselves in its activities and culture. According to an interview with a community partner, “there’s not much that people can do here that is meaningful that doesn’t require an investment of time,” (Stoecker 35). In other words, for student to truly become invested in the community project, they must be involved long-term. At Ball State, this is an issue that many professors and administrators are noticing on campus and in town, but campus leaders in community engagement are identifying ways to change this trend. Sustainable projects are one such solution, as demonstrated by an existing project on Ball State’s campus.

At a forum dedicated to improving Ball State’s connections with the community, panelist Eva Zygmunt, professor of elementary education at Ball State University commented that long-term engagement provided “opportunities for students to authentically engage and build relationships with organizations, with individuals, and with families.” Zygmunt organizes a program at an inner-city elementary school, Muncie P3, which puts elementary education majors in the classroom to tutor and assist in the school. Zygmunt’s personal experiences with this program are evidence of what we’ve found in our research, including how a personal connection forged in a community engagement project leads to roots in the community. “Many of our



candidates move on to other places throughout the country... but more than we would have expected have stayed because of those connections,” (Zygmunt). In places like Muncie, Indiana, and other areas struggling to retain the best students, encouraging them to stay in the state is essential. “Indiana suffers from a low ranking among the states in the percentage of the population with a bachelor’s degree or higher, sitting firmly within the bottom 20 percent,” meaning that many college graduates leave the state after finishing their degrees, a phenomenon many refer to as brain drain (Faulk 1). With more efforts made to connect students to the Muncie community, we think that students would develop ties that would lead to more students staying after graduation, as Muncie P3 demonstrated in the school system.

Sustainable projects offer more benefits to community organizations. When a group of students is consistently involved with the same community partner, focusing on a particular problem and project, the students are able to dedicate themselves to creative solutions. The community partner is able to fully take advantage of the resources the students have to offer as well as the university infrastructure backing them. Allowing students to implement an agreed upon project under the community partner’s supervision gives the community partner more time to devote to other projects needing their attention. This allows the community group to make the most of the volunteer hours put in by students.

Long-term, sustainable service benefits the students as well. Creating and implementing an entire project is a better line on a resume, reflecting a student’s abilities, involvement, and initiative. The student also gains experience less tangible than a line on a resume. As previously analyzed, part of an honors education is to expand students minds and encourage them to see the world from different perspectives and points of view. In a successful honors program, students should think about, and even struggle with, complex ideas without easy answers. Often, honors

programs encourage volunteer work to expose students to different types of living, and encourage them to think more about the world outside of their own experience. One author, discussing problems with short term service, wrote that “we cannot expect students to acquire the requisite skills to understand and grapple with questions of justice through a one-off service requirement any more than we can expect first-semester students to write a thesis,” (Klos 54). This comparison highlights the level of effort and deeper-thinking that is required of more developed community engagement initiatives. Students completing volunteer work to earn their hours or fulfill a course requirement are less likely to make connections between their volunteer experience and the greater context of societal issues. When students engage in a long-term project and form a deeper connection with the community, they learn to recognize the problems in the community and how the organization is attempting to address them. These connections offer a better learning-experience for students.

It’s clear that sustainability is an essential component of a successful community engagement program. What may be less clear is why to create a sustainable program through an honors college. By creating these programs through the framework of the honors college, it allows for a more permanent presence. That is not to say that the program should not be created and led by students, but rather that an honors program can provide a sense of permanence, which is essential for building trust in community partners who may be accustomed to programs ending when the student leaves. Sustainability is a central component of community engagement programs and can be achieved by creating lasting partnerships, evaluating consistently, and adapting when necessary. There are several best practices to create strong, lasting partnerships with the community, which will be discussed in the following section.

### Creating Partnerships that Last

Consistent and constructive communication with community partners is critical to the success of the project and relationship building. Despite communication being perhaps the most obvious aspect of positive relationship building, it is often the weakest link. Patricia Powell, a member of the honors community, described her experience on a project. "We were quickly faced with the rude awakening and realization that in working with other people, communication breakdowns-and glitches easily occur. We had planned to begin the program in mid-October and when we contacted the secretary at Childs Elementary school to verify this fact, we were informed that they were not expecting us," (Powell 103). For this class, cleaning up the channels of communication was enough, but in some scenarios such gaps in communication could lead the community to believe the project is not organized well enough to be successful.

In the initial stages of creating community engagement programs, the first step is to align student visions with the visions of the community. Neither side should only see their goals and ideas come to life - both sides should be represented in the project. This alignment of vision and goals can only happen if "communication is sufficiently open so that all parties are able to freely discuss and share thoughts and insights," (Ahmed 8). At the basis of open communication there must be a general sense that both partners are of equal value and importance, an idea we have emphasised at several times in this paper.

Another aspect of aligning both partner's visions for the project is ensuring that both partners are working in tandem towards the same end, rather than pushing against one another as they try to accomplish different goals. Communication of goals is critical, and if ignored, can potentially damage the relationship between the university and the community. Programs are most successful when all those involved respect one another, communicate openly, and have the



same goals. There is also a potential danger in failing to clearly set goals, after all, “without knowing where we are going, it is hard to know if we have ever arrived,” (Harwood, “Why”). Setting clear goals is the only way to determine if a project is doing what it is supposed to, and should be one of the first steps of a successful community engagement program. Once you have set goals and have worked towards achieving them, there is another step - evaluation.

### Evaluation

Partnerships can be complicated, relying on evolving relationships between a variety of individuals and groups, making long-term sustainability difficult. Goals may diverge as the students and community partners involved change over the years. For this reason, regular systems of evaluation must be in place. “If sustainability [is] to be achieved, the types and kinds of relationships between all stakeholders must be front and center in the evaluation and evaluations should be ongoing, just as the relationships are,” (Blackburn 164). If the community engagement program was a part of a class (i.e. service learning), this evaluation might happen in the form of a grade. We have argued already that this form of summative assessment is not necessarily beneficial to the community or the students, because simply giving a letter grade for the work done is not the best form of evaluation when working towards genuine outcomes with real people. In his book, Stoecker discusses the disadvantage of grading students work, writing that “we should consider whether the time community organization staff spend in completing student evaluations... could be better used to evaluate the impact of the students on the community itself,” (94-95). Instead of grading, our research indicates that a formative evaluation, focused on the relationships built, is likely to yield better long-term results for all involved.

In order for evaluation to be effective, it has to move past reviewing the work done. Cress recommends a series of steps for an evaluation. "Evaluate an experience, draw insights, try something new based on those insights, and evaluate the experience again," not only reviewing what has happened, but also using that knowledge to improve the program in the future (Cress, *Learning* 126). Both partners have to be tactical and willing to adapt to the results of the evaluation and feedback they receive. If one partner is too locked into their idea of what the project should be and is unable to revise their vision, the program will not be able to make the necessary adaptations to sustain itself. A program may be highly successful for a few months without evaluation or change, but rarely is a project sustainable in the long term without both partners being able to readjust and realign their goals when necessary. After all, programs are often subject to forces outside of their control; "changes in communities emerge over time and we must spend as much time re-calibrating our efforts as we do planning them," (Harwood, "Why"). Such uncontrollable forces include funding, community interest, and university support. Any project hoping to last in the long term must be able to change with the times and work with changing levels of support from those involved. In short, "to survive, the partnership must adapt," (Beere 205).

An evaluation system is not just for aligning goals and maintaining sustainability. The evaluation must also determine whether the project is accomplishing what it was intended for, and is having positive outcomes for the community. To a certain degree, this will require the gathering of data, determining metrics and analyzing the work that has been done. This is often referred to as measuring the "impact" of the project, and is an important part of evaluating a program. Data should be used to help direct practices, because data helps ensure that methods being used are actually proven to work. One must be careful, however, because studying impact

and data can shift focus away from the community, and, “if we’re not careful, we’ll lose sight of our most precious mission: to help people transform their lives and build stronger communities,” (Harwood, “Urgent Warning”). When judging whether a project is accomplishing its goals, one must move beyond just data, and talk with the people the program is intended to help. Even if both partners believe their project is doing great things, and the data seems to show positive results, it’s possible that the community being worked with is not actually being served by the project, or is failing to meet their most essential needs.

### Navigating Potential Problems

Throughout this paper, we have discussed potential pitfalls of community engagement and given advice for how to avoid those potential problems. There are some issues that are not as simple to solve. In our research, we came across issues that are difficult to avoid, even with the best planning and intentions. One issue that often came up in our research was what happened when a project completely failed. The chance of failure is high when dealing with so many factors and entities on a single project. The trick of mastering failure is to recognize how progress can still be made and relationships kept intact. Failure does not have to be an end point, but instead can be a learning experience that can lead to an improved program in the future.

Issues of waning university or community support are also common, but there are options when this occurs. The university may be unwilling to launch a major project, especially in situations where they cannot be in full control. Even if a large project isn’t feasible at first, perhaps there are “smaller, more tactical projects that might (or might not) lead to something larger and/or more sustainable in the future,” (Donnelly 130). Another problem we encountered was a lack of trust and support among the community and potential partners. In university



communities, it can be difficult for community partners to trust anyone coming from the university. People “may remember times when the community served as a laboratory for faculty research without consideration for the feelings of the community members... and without benefit[ing] the community,” (Beere 195). University groups with the best intentions may struggle to develop partnerships with a community that has, rightly, written off community-university partnerships. It takes time to repair these relationships. Beere recommends that the university must “listen to the community, understand their concerns, and acknowledge past problems before trying to move forward,” (195). In these scenarios, the students must do their best to represent themselves in the present to mend these bridges.

There is a damaging effect that comes from expecting the community to come to the university and navigate the “university geography.” The impenetrability of the university structure can be a barrier to productive community engagement initiatives, for “to the non-academic, the university is a near-inscrutable entity governed by its own mysterious sense of itself. It’s difficult to get a grip on this institution, understand its points of leverage, and find a way through the academic maze,” (Kellogg Commission 20). University buildings contain mostly classrooms, laboratories, and other student-oriented resources, making it difficult for community members to feel as though they belong in those spaces. Relying on the expectation that community members should want to come to the university for cultural experience, knowledge, and assistance is a sure way to invite project failure. As we mentioned in connection with the arts and culture community forum, this mindset of wondering why the community wouldn’t come to campus is essentially voicing the belief that the community and what it provides is inferior to the university.

Even if the community is familiar with the university geography and willing to navigate it, the students should still take themselves into the community to develop a well-rounded understanding of the place they live and their neighbors. This helps to build understanding and empathy, as well as form meaningful connections with people outside of the university structure. At the 2017 National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference in Atlanta, Georgia the plenary speaker Bryan Stevenson, a civil rights activist and lawyer, discussed the idea of proximity; in order to help someone, one must get proximate to them. We believe that a university and its students cannot truly impact the community from the “ivory tower” of campus. Students must be working with and in the community to affect real change.

### Conclusion

In the process of our research, we have been asked “where does the perfect model for community engagement exist?” At the time of this writing, based on the research we have done, the perfect community engagement program does not exist. We cannot point to any one university and say “there it is,” nor would we want to. Programs should be developed by students for a specific population. Through our research, we have been able to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses, the most important of which we have outlined in this paper. Community engagement is an ever developing field that is contemporary and relevant to honors education. At the 2017 NCHC conference, there were several presentations relating to service learning and community engagement. In these conversations and within almost all of the research we have done, the focus for university-community partnerships seems to be mostly on service learning programs. We hope to contribute a new perspective to this conversation by encouraging honors colleges to consider engagement outside of volunteerism and service learning programs.

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## Appendix

### A. “10 Ways to Fail at Community Engagement: A Practical Guide”

While planning for our presentation at the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference, we realized that the best way to approach our presentation was with humor to point out some of the absurdities discovered in our research. Failure is a recurring theme throughout our research. We discovered that other researchers had come to the conclusion that failure was inevitable due to the nature of the work and the number of moving parts and potential complications. Furthermore, the best practices of community engagement sound like common sense when presented in a list. “Communicate with your partner. Value their opinions. Respect their knowledge.” And yet, problems like these arose regularly in our research. To draw attention to this discrepancy between common sense and what occurs in practice, we presented “10 Ways to Fail at Community Engagement: A Practical Guide.”

The handout from the presentation is included below. The points in orange illustrate the most common failures relating to the university structure. The purple points focus on failures relating directly to the university expectations. The blue points include failures tied to the community partner.

## B. The Guide

The following guide distills the information found in the thesis to a digestible guide pointing to the major points made in this paper including understanding benefits for stakeholders, support on campus, community-university relationship, partnerships, sustainability, and evaluations.

## Blueprint #1 Daughter Organization

Perhaps one of the best blueprints based on our research for an honors based community engagement initiative would be to create an organization focused on community engagement and service. This group would be its own entity, self-governing but under the wing of the current student-governing body Student Honors Council (SHC). The daughter organization would be responsible for identifying community needs and community partners with whom they would develop a project. Because SHC is already an operable group, it could help guide the new organization and provide support. SHC has had an active Director of Service who organizes one-time service opportunities. This individual could be responsible for communicating between the two groups.

The organization would arrange a partnership and project, likely led by a core-group of students who would make up an executive board and be the students primarily responsible for communication. They would work with the community partner to coordinate schedules and recruit interested students to be a part of the organization and actively work in the community. Creating the daughter organization would provide the necessary structure to arrange for sustainability while remaining student-driven and flexible. A faculty advisor through the honors college could assist with continuing the project without organizing it, acting as a collaborator rather than as an organizer.

Potential partnerships would be possible with Ross Community Center or other organizations which would find a diverse group of students with a variety of creative talents useful to their organization. Projects could include teaching mini lessons with a creative focus. For example, students enthusiastic about fashion could work with middle school aged girls on fashion from around the world, teaching about other countries and incorporating lessons on



clothing as a means of culture and as self-expression, relating the lesson to the lives of the girls in attendance. Meanwhile, a different project could focus on music or art lessons or experiments in science and technology. Allowing for this diverse array of student talents and interests would leave the program flexible and student-driven. The individual lessons might not be sustainable, but the structure would be.

#### Blueprint #2 The Exhibition

In the discussions with Ball State students, faculty, and administrators, one idea for community engagement kept arising in various forms. This idea was for the community and honors students to partner in some way, and end with an exhibition of some variety. This sounds so broad because it represents several different fully formed ideas that came up during our discussions. Below, one of these ideas is more fully fleshed out.

##### The Curiosities Fair

In this community engagement program, Ball State Honors students regularly visit local high schools and meet with students. At those meetings, Ball State students can teach their own skills and hobbies to the Muncie students. The skills being taught could vary widely but could include things such as photography, dance, poetry, or science. After a year, or semester, the Muncie students would exhibit what they have created with the help of honors at an adapted “science fair.” The exhibition would likely take place in the community, allowing easy access to students and community members. Creators of this idea also mentioned that students might be able to sell their work, using the funds to continue the program, or perhaps donate them to a community organization.

This example meets many of the requirements that we outlined in this paper. The project builds on the nature of honors by allowing students of any discipline to teach their skills. It also takes honors into the community and operates there rather than expecting anyone to come to the university. On the other hand, this type of community engagement doesn't necessarily address a community "need" in the same way other projects might. This could be addressed, however, by working more closely with the community, and adapting the project based on what the community needs. For example, a local community center recently approached our organization with a need for honors students to come in regularly and spend time working on creative projects with students. Building off of that expressed need might lead to some type of exhibition and integrate both ideas into one which would meet the needs of both partners.

### Blueprint #3 The Honors Taco Truck

One of the first ideas that helped develop our research originated from our thesis advisor, Dr. Timothy Berg who thought of the idea years before we became involved. His concept was for an honors taco truck. This concept turns heads, because it sounds so offbeat and strange. In our understanding, the honors taco truck would be a sort of "guerilla" approach to honors, where the truck, full of students, would travel throughout the community and bring humanities along with them. In one instance, they might project a poem onto a building. Another example might involve students teaching a makeshift drawing workshop to locals. This idea, still in development, again, would take students and honors off campus and export their unique qualities into the community. With some effort and coordination with community partners and community organizers, it could be adjusted to be more focused on the community, and work to address its needs.

### C. Blueprints

Each honors program and honors college is unique to the university and environment it is created for. "Beginning in Honors: A Handbook" by Samuel Schuman explores the characteristics of honors programs and colleges, attempting to outline a set of standards.

Choices should depend directly upon the shape of the remainder of the school's educational program and its unique desires and needs... An honors program is part of a complex educational structure to which it must mold itself with creativity and sensitivity; it cannot be a freestanding enterprise. To say that each honors program is unique and institution-specific, of course, is not to say that no guidelines or standards for honors obtain. Just as each American college or university is unlike any other, but all submit to widely recognized standards for accreditation, so the NCHC, as the national organization of honors colleges and programs has defined a set of "basic characteristics for a fully developed honors program," and a similar checklist for a "fully developed honors college." (Schumer 11)

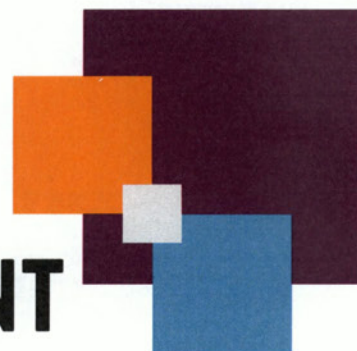
So too, community engagement initiatives based in honors will not look the same due to differences in honors programs and differences in the communities they seek to serve.

Determining standard best practices for honors programs operating in the community accomplishes a similar goal as "Beginning in Honors: A Handbook" does for honors programs.

Included are potential blueprints for how an honors college or program can structurally build community engagement into the culture of their institution leading to sustainable initiatives.



# 10 WAYS TO FAIL AT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



## A Practical Guide\*

- 1 Engage in unconnected, one-time service events
- 2 Operate on university time
- 3 Benefit the student, not the community
- 4 Focus entirely on an undefined product
- 5 Assume your knowledge is superior to the community's
- 6 Expect community members to come to you
- 7 Treat community members like test subjects
- 8 Fail to communicate with the community partner
- 9 Ignore the diversity of the community
- 10 Tell the community what they need

\* Warning: following this guide may lead to a strained relationship with the community, high blood pressure, unhappy students, unnecessary pain and suffering, heartburn, and ineffective programs

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# ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH HONORS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Alyssa Larsen & Maren Orchard



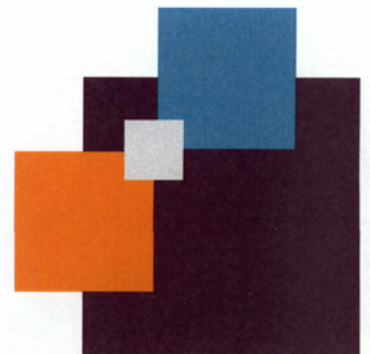
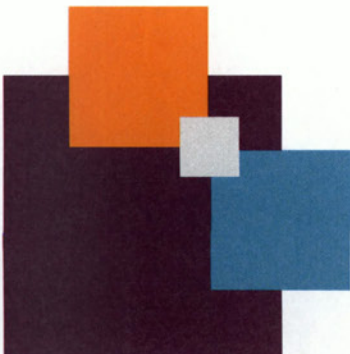
## CONTENTS:

**BENEFITS TO STAKEHOLDERS**  
**SUPPORT ON CAMPUS**  
**COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIP**  
**PARTNERSHIPS**  
**SUSTAINABILITY**  
**EVALUATIONS**



## WHY HONORS?

Honors invites students, faculty, and administrators to explore and experiment with creative, unique, off-beat ideas in order to create meaningful classroom experiences. Part of the experimentation in honors is valuing process over product—placing the learning experience over letter grades. Furthermore, collaboration and the development of meaningful relationships through interdisciplinary classroom time creates a space where students from a variety of backgrounds can learn from one another. “The most groundbreaking work in research is done at the fringes of disciplines, where they meet and mingle with one another.” (Cress learning 116) These efforts, combined with the focus on expanding students’ worldview, make honors an exemplary place for creating long-term community engagement programs.





# BENEFITS TO STAKEHOLDERS

During the initiation phase of any community engagement program, students, honors colleges, and community partners may wonder “what’s in it for me?” This critical question is essential to defining the project. Each partner must understand what they are getting out of the project in order for it to be worth their time. According to one community organizer, “what makes it successful is that we each come out of it feeling like we’ve gotten something,” (Stoecker 155). Although the benefits to all stakeholders should be carefully considered, it is important to prioritize the community and its needs.

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## COMMUNITY

- Expanded network of financial and human resources
- Access to faculty expertise
- Student innovation and creativity
- Staff hours supplemented by volunteer hours
- Publicity
- Research

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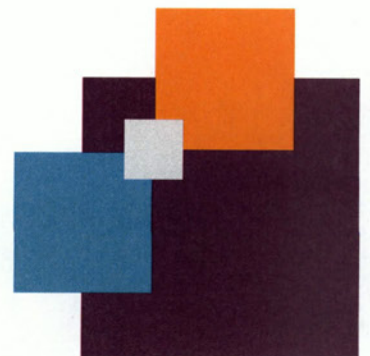
## STUDENTS

- Experience for résumé
- Network of contacts
- Real-world experience in their field
- Understanding of self
- Active citizens

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## UNIVERSITY

- Reciprocal exchange of knowledge
- Media attention
- Fulfillment of mission statements
- Improves quality of life for students and faculty





# SUPPORT ON CAMPUS

For students to embark on creating a community engagement project, they must have the support of their honors college or program and the university. Projects should be student-driven because it gives them the agency and ownership to make it successful and their own.

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## MISSION STATEMENTS

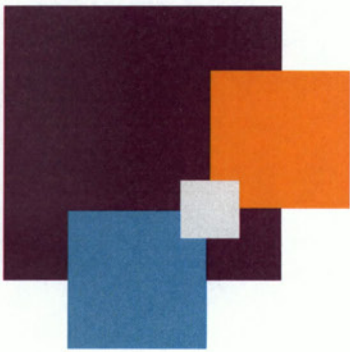
A university or honors college that talks about community engagement in their mission statements must actually support the creation of those programs if they wish to demonstrate their commitment to the community, the students, and their mission. The university also benefits from the fulfillment of its mission. When considering potential benefits to the honors college and university, it is vital to remember the “why” behind the betterment of the community. It’s common to see community engagement spun by university marketing and the media to advance the public image of the university. And while this is an auxiliary benefit, it should not be the main drive behind the engagement program. Rather, the main “why” should be creating and supporting programs that make a long-term difference in the community.

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## PROJECTS

It’s important to be cognizant of other community engagement initiatives on and around campus. Are there any other projects similar to the one being proposed? Are there other service organizations doing similar work? Are there other individuals or groups on campus who specialize in the area the project will address? Seeking collaboration and an inter-disciplinary team will give more opportunities and lead to a more satisfying experience. It’s also important to consider scope. Perhaps there are smaller projects to be embarked upon which can build up to a larger project down the road. It takes time to become established in community engagement initiatives, so staying conscious of these factors will lead to greater success.





# COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIP

The language used to describe work in the community defines the relationship and the narrative of community and university partnerships. "Problem solving 'for' communities is an outdated and elitist view," (Thomas 90). This problematic dynamic should be avoided in the development of a community engagement program. Rather than programming "for" the community or "to" the community, our research indicates that changing the narrative to engaging "with" the community will lead to more positive outcomes for both the university and for the community partners. In the same vein of changing the language, students should not visualize their work as "saving" the community, but rather see themselves as genuine partners who forge an authentic connection with the community and those who live within it.

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## STRATEGIES VS. TACTICS

Most universities, when engaging with the community, use strategic models, "proceeding as if the university were the controlling institution determining movements and interactions" (Mathieu xiv). This orientation places the university above the community, where ideas and programs come from the top and are organized within the university framework. Tactical models open the door to change and creativity. A tactical model may sound more challenging, but is overall a better practice for community engagement, allowing for equal partnerships and flexibility.

STRATEGIES	TACTICS
Stable	Changing
Institutional	Creative
Structured	Flexible
Controlled	Making-do
Standard	Observant



# PARTNERSHIPS

Community partners, defined as “members of the community in businesses, government agencies, and social service organizations that agree to work with students individually or collectively in order to meet community needs,” (Cress, Learning 18) can join with students to create meaningful partnerships, encouraging all parties to commit to projects and ideas beyond either entities’ usual abilities.

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## PROACTIVITY

University partners must be proactive in approaching and making themselves known to the community. Students must actively go into the community to assess the needs there rather than expecting the community to come to them.

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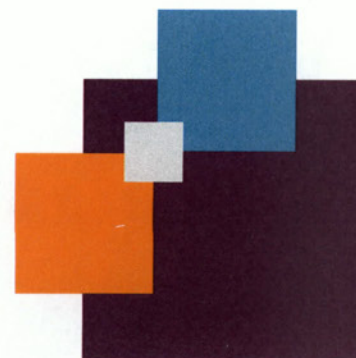
## UNIVERSITY TIME & GEOGRAPHY

It’s important to realize that the community does not operate on the same schedule as the university. If the goal is to aid the community, recognizing the differences between the scheduled days and year-long calendar is important. Rarely do the needs of the community fit into the format of the academic year or semester. So to, the university campus can be an impenetrable barrier for those unfamiliar. Efforts must be made to ease the differences in experiences. Don’t expect the community to come to the university, assuming that because the facilities are superior and available that community members will want to come to campus.

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## LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

Assuming the university partners have superior knowledge to the community is problematic. It is critical to “recognize community partners as legitimate sources of valuable knowledge,” (Donnelly 128). Due to the power dynamic and knowledge base in university-community partnerships, many assume the community is inferior.





# PARTNERSHIPS

Once a partnership is formed, the relationship must be treated carefully by both of the partners. The community partner is focusing on their organization and resources while the university partners are often focused on the work they're also doing on campus.

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## DIVERSITY

The community being served by the university is not always a cohesive entity. There are different groups of people and neighborhoods, creating a diverse population. University partners should be wary of neglecting the diversity of a community.

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## COMMUNICATION

Communication often becomes a barrier to maintaining partnerships despite it being perhaps the most obvious aspect of positive-relationship building. "Fostering a relationship where communication is sufficiently open so that all parties are able to freely discuss and share thoughts and insights is fundamental to community-academic partnerships, and increases the likelihood of the success of the project," (Ahmed 8).

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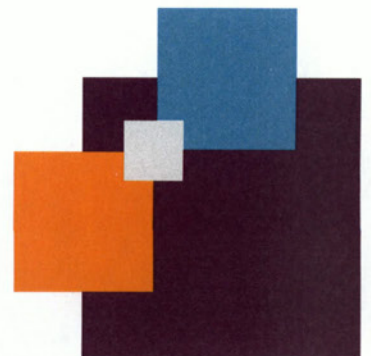
## GOAL ALIGNMENT

Setting clear goals for the project and matching those goals to those of the community partner is the only way to ensure both parties are working towards the same end and determine if a project is successful.

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## FACILITATING

The university partners should see their role as facilitating the community partner in accomplishing their goals. Ideas should come from the bottom-up, originating with the community based on their needs and wanted improvements.



# SUSTAINABILITY

Creating a project to be sustainable is a critical step and an enormous challenge for both the university and community partners . Both entities are constantly undergoing changes in staff and students come and go through the university. To create a sustainable project, there must be a structure in place which will allow new students to take up the project as well as make it their own.

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## LASTING PARTNERSHIPS

Rather than just forming a relationship between individuals, a lasting partnership would develop between the organization at all levels and the university partner. Basing a project in an existing entity like an Honors College or Program provides the lasting structure for students to operate within. Having administrative support is critical to ensure that the program will outlast a group of students or a faculty member.

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## FLEXIBILITY

Honors is full of students with diverse talents and interests. To build a successful program, these interests should be taken into account. If a program is designed with certain elements of flexibility, new students and new ideas can be incorporated so long as the needs of the community are still taken into account and the goals are mutual and in alignment.

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## LONG TERM EXPOSURE

For students to have an experience which significantly affects their learning, they should spend an extended time in the community. "We cannot expect students to acquire the requisite skills to understand and grapple with questions of justice through a one-off service requirement any more than we can expect first-semester students to write a thesis," (Klos 54).





# EVALUATIONS

Conducting consistent evaluations of community engagement initiatives allows for both partners to keep up a continuous dialogue, discussing what's working and what isn't while allowing for change. "If sustainability [is] to be achieved, the types and kinds of relationships between all stakeholders must be front and center in the evaluation and evaluations should be ongoing, just as the relationships are," (Blackburn 164).

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## PROCESS OVER PRODUCT

It's important to remember that a formal product isn't necessary to community engagement. One of the benefits of exploring community engagement through honors is the comfortability in honors of asking questions without answers. The process of community engagement and the relationships formed are the most critical, not working towards a grade or a final, neat product. Evaluations help determine if these goals are being met and if the process is working for all partners.

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## OUTCOMES

Data should be used to help direct practices, ensuring that methods being used are actually proven to work. The type of data collected depends on the project being conducted, but being able to show that the project is accomplishing something is important to morale of the partners and the survival of the project, particularly if there is funding attached.

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## FLEXIBILITY TO REVISE

Evaluations will provide reason for change, further demonstrating how flexibility is essential to the process of sustainable community engagement initiatives. "Evaluate an experience, draw insights, try something new based on those insights, and evaluate the experience again," (Cress 126).

